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DAVID BYRNE

Gets Fidgety

by Mark Muro

David Byrne is always at work on something, sometimes rock 'n' roll. He plays the guitar well and has the voice of a chicken. When he writes songs, they can be about office workers. Life has been such for him that he has no real attitude toward it beyond bemusement. He looks like an emaciated owl as he grooves the streets of Soho, offering notes. That's what he's doing now.

"I get fidgety," he says.

"Sometimes I overwork myself, but other times I can be reasonable."

Soon, he says, he'll kick back a little.

"Maybe I'll go to Cuba," he figures.

Or maybe, he adds, he won't.

Because he's busy, you see.

Like the universe, Byrne's strange little world has been expanding this fall, and things aren't like they used to be.

In the old days—say eight, nine years ago—this rail-thin front for New York's great Talking Heads yelped like a lovelorn systems analyst, a twitching, bug-eyed nerd with a ballpoint in his pocket. His first cult-hit, "Psycho Killer," was a catchy pop portrait of a wacko who talks to himself in French—and indeed, from day one, Byrne's chilly, fractured world was definitely a specialty number. Later came the heavy funk of *Fear Of Music* and the even better *Remain In Light,* each built solid under the eerie hysteria of Byrne the psychotic tent preacher. African polyrhythms stacked over Motown, 42nd Street riffing slid into the ozone wash of minimalist collaborator Brian Eno, and suddenly Byrne's bizarre mottos of science and evangelism sounded bigger, wider than before. In time Byrne's increasingly long arms could even embrace at once New York's highbrow avant-garde, which he first impressed with *The Catherine Wheel,* his 1981 score for a Twyla Tharp dance, and the shopping mall millions who flocked to *Stop Making Sense,* Talking Heads' mesmerizing idea of a concert movie. Then, as he donned the now-famous Big Suit to croon a love-song to a lamp, Byrne emerged a huge blimp on the horizon of darkest America.

And he looms even larger these days.

Sure, this 34-year-old surrealist/technoid still possesses an insubstantial physique, only now—as rock star, performance artist and movie director—his music, his record sales all have grown as big as a house.

This fall 10 cities across the country checked out the hypnotic brass marches Byrne composed for *the Knee Plays,* a section of avant-garde theater director Robert Wilson's epic opera *the CIVIL WarS,* but that was nothing. During the last few months Byrne's seen the release of product titled *True Stories* in every form but stone tablets. In October a boppy new Talking Heads album called *True Stories* started selling nicely, followed by a book version, and, after that, the movie itself—Byrne's first venture in film.

Based on bizarre but authentic clips collected from tabloids during Talking Heads' *Stop Making Sense* tour in 1983, the movie has not only revealed a new side of its mastermind, but proven the biggest expression of his sensibility yet. Written, directed, and starred in by the erstwhile punk Einstein, this "genuine G-rated pseudo-documentary" with music tells the fractured fairy-tale of an imaginary American town, Virgil, Tex., that marks its sesquincentenial with happy little "Celebration Of Specialness." Homeowners parade with lawnmowers, Shriners in fezzes look idiotic as they drive miniature red Mustangs, families eat dinner, all while the lonesome computer engineer Louis Fyne finds true love with The Laziest Woman In The World. Above fly Byrne's exuberantly dumb lyrics about "People like us/People who answer the telephone"; behind lies the familiar Byrne terrain of parking lots, metal sheds, roads to nowhere. As for the bemused Byrne, he wanders around narrating his findings in the moonlander English of some wing-nut anthropologist dressed in the kind of fake cowboy threads you get in the Sears catalogue. Like a distant relation of Mr.

Photo by Bob Alford

Rogers on acid, he seems stunned, enchanted, puzzled.

"This is the Varicorp plant..." he intones.

"It's cool," he says.

"Sort of a multipurpose shape...a box."

Later he begins to dig it.

"I like it. I like it...I like it," he says. "Seems to be a different attitude around here."

And not least, one might add, in the eye of the beholder.

It's almost as if Byrne feels that, like the line on the little kid's T-shirt in one scene, he's "only visiting this planet."

To meet David Byrne is to encounter what happens when, through persistence and talent, the class science brain becomes an adult genius.

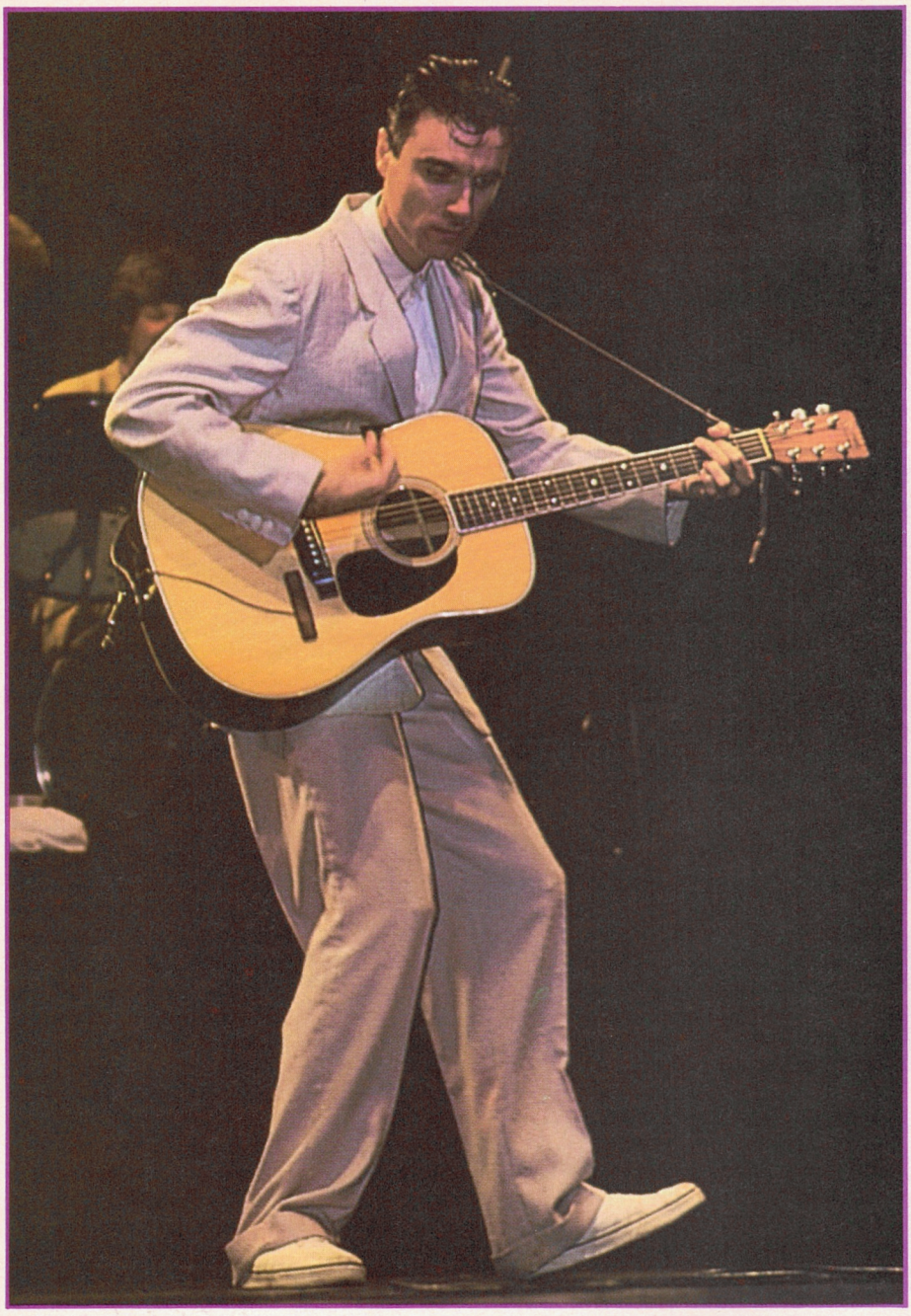
In this respect, he's not exactly Ozzy Osbourne.

Bird-like, he slips into a neon-dark Soho cavern called Bar Lui with the unobtrusiveness of a guy who's not used to people, and though his unstylish style is the envy of millions, he even then appears a little anxious with the demands of entrances, or maybe gravity. There's no pelvis swinging here. He sort of skulks as he ducks his slicked-back head to cross the room. Delivered to a balcony booth, he hunches there, modest in black jeans and zipped-up dork's jacket. In fact, it's very hard indeed to reconcile this modest, awkward-looking guy with the intensity of his maniacal stage presence. How ordinary he is: when he greets his food with a cheerful "Big pizza!" it's apparent Byrne is, if not exactly the guy next door, a specimen familiar from every suburb's high school chemistry class. Yet if he's not a stranger, he's still strange. Essentially a stick-figure, he devours his food at racing speed, but ruminates any question for slow-ticking seconds, as if he thinks there's a right answer. When he does speak, his flat comments seem almost antiseptic, like the proceedings of some conference on water resources. Sometimes he just laughs—but then you remember the lyric: "There's a party in my mind/And I hope it never stops." The effect is spacey but pleasant: like having lunch with a very polite man from Mars.

Right now, though, Byrne is thinking about earthly success, which at some level seems to worry him.

"Yeah, there is a lot of me coming out right now," he says, ripping at vegetarian pizza, but then, allowing as how he feels "like I could run out of ideas if I wasn't careful," he suggests maybe he "should just kick back and watch the reaction a while.

"I mean," he says, "it's always flattering, being famous, but sometimes it's dis-



"Why on *earth* would Neil Young insist I give this guitar to Freddie Mercury?"

"In a small way, we tried to reinvent pop songs."

concerting when people stop you when you're shopping for groceries. You wonder if they really like you."

He laughs.

"I've never stopped to ask what they like," he says.

"You think they'll just stop liking you."

Then he grows even more strangely prudent as he tries to explain how he devises the polyrhythmic architecture, the cryptic chirps of his music. Again, this isn't some scumbag idiot from California talking. As if reading from a clipboard, he dissects each field in which he works, describing each in the abstract terms of its particular "little problem." Success in each, he appears to assume, proceeds from the solution of a different mathematical equation. It appears to have nothing to do with getting drunk.

That morning, he begins, he's been working on a song for director Jonathan Demme's movie *Something Wild.* That, he explained, "is one kind of game," because, "it's for the title sequence so it has to build in a certain way, change feel at a certain place, and then finish in a specified amount of time." In general, he says, writing a song works like a puzzle: "You get a little idea, take stuff off random list of words, mess around a lot." By contrast, he goes on, scoring the 13 connecting vignettes, or "Knee Plays," of Wilson's opera, represented "a real learning experience" because "unlike with a song, there were no guidelines at all for what we could do. There was really nothing there," he says of Wilson's conception. "There was one drawing for each play and nothing else. It didn't describe the music, the style of acting, anything. There was the barest frame, and no restraints."

As for his movie, he says that required still another approach.

"I wanted to make a traveloge of a whole town and the different kind of cool ways people live," he specifies. "So to do that we had to minimize the story so the audience felt it was OK to wander off and look at something else for a while."

"That way," he adds, "we could have a little music, a little story, some visual things."

Asked what kind of music, what kind of visual things, he answers quickly.

"Oh, ordinary things," he says. "Like a normal landscape in Texas, only you frame it and light it so it's real but weirder than real: like postcards. Or people: I thought it was more fun to present things in a generous, appreciative way than to complain. I thought it was fun to point out the kind of cool, eccentric things normal people are doing." That's why, he adds, he likes the music in the movie and on the last Talking Heads album, what with all that Tex-Mex rave-up and rapturous country caltzing on "Dream Operator" and even its token heavy metal number, "Love For Sale." "I think it's good," he says, "having music that tells about the way people really live in the movie, and in a lot of America."

Then he pauses, concentrating on his fork.

"It's kind of like laughing at people but giving them their due all the same," he says.

"That's something new for me."

Of course, Byrne has come a long way these 10 years, and before that, light years from his down-and-out days at the Rhode Island School Of Design where he'd play versions of "96 Tears" on the ukelele and pass out questionnaires on extraterrestials.

The nerdy son of a Scottish electronics whiz, Byrne grew up mainly in suburban Baltimore after his family located there when he was seven. By all accounts, young David amounted to just another odd kid with vague pretensions. "I guess I didn't hate it," he says of school. "I just

"I don't think so separate anymore."

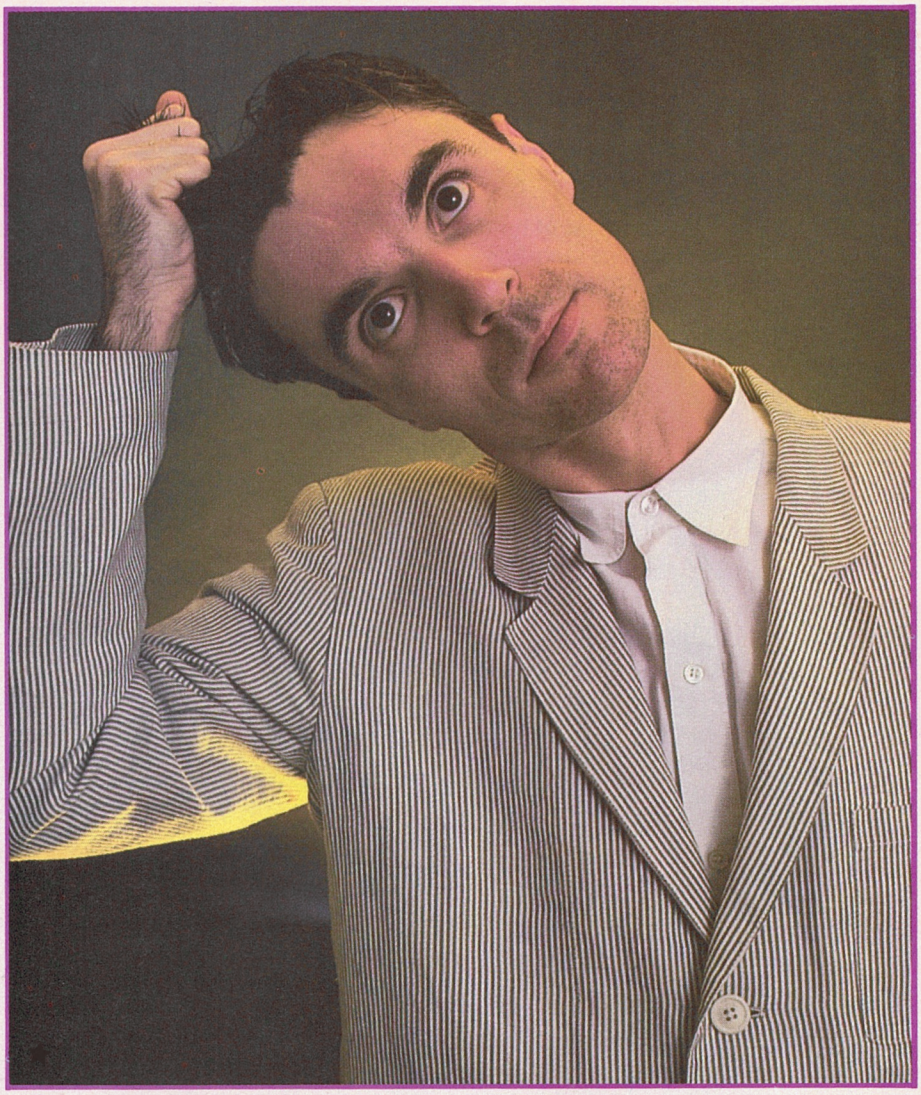
wanted to do something somewhat creative." For a while, he adds, he thought he might puruse "some kind of research into pure math or pure science." But then his ambitions took other forms. By junior high, David was the kid who played songs like Donovan's "Barabajaggle" at a local coffee house, and in high school he ran for president of the student council on an anarchy platform. Nobody knew what he was talking about, but that didn't matter.

"It was the '60s," he says. "There seemed to be a lot of possibilities."

He was, however, a pretty strange item nevertheless. Lewis Jones' recent biography, for example, is filled with hilarious testimony harkening back to the obscure kid who made good. "In terms of what was cool then, I would have to characterize David as pretty nerdy," remembers the requisite high school classmate. "I would say he always wanted to be famous," observes a childhood neighbor. "David was a horrible artist—he couldn't even take Polaroid pictures," recalls the little sister of an art school friend. Finally, the ultimate! "He's a weird guy."

When he went to RISD, he lived in a big house in a bad neighborhood and gravitated to the weirdest stuff going on. He dug James Brown. Wrote free-form poetry. Wandered around with a few fellow oddballs "taking pictures, talking, going to movies." When he formed an early band, it was a duo performing "Pennies From Heaven" on accordian and fiddle. One show found Byrne producing a dead fish on which he proceeded to pound his feet. "That's stupid! You're so stupid!" screamed one of his friends, walking out, and that was that. Shortly thereafter he bleached his hair. When he dropped out and headed for New York City, it wasn't before he'd hooked up with another RISD student, Chris Frantz, in a band called the Artistics, a.k.a. the Autistics. For a while, though, New York was a drag, David got "depressed," decided his work of art would be to become a systems analyst: he would call himself a life system, operate his existence as a lifelong art project.

But then his life was saved by rock 'n' roll.



"Please use that massive cattle prod you're holding to shock these escaping head lice into submission. *Please*?"

Allying with the preppishness, the clear-headedness of Frantz and his cute girlfriend, Tina Weymouth, Byrne formed Talking Heads, a band unlike any other. They are very weird because they are clean-cut, not to mention nervously cerebral, unsleazy, demented, and, yes, funny. They are also well-connected, because Tina's sister-in-law, Lally Weymouth, the daughter of *Washington Post* chairman-publisher Katherine Graham, wrote for *New York* magazine, and the new guitar player on the first album, Jerry Harrison, came from Harvard. Whatever, though, they wore alligator shirts there alongside other Manhattan bands like Television, Blondie and the Ramones—and they managed to blow everyone away with strangeness. The upshot was that their nervous guitar scratches and stiff, twitchy rhythm brought an immediate following in the primordial punk swamp at CBGB's. So impressed was Joey Ramone that he even noted how Byrne did "those weird things with his eyes."

But the shock was more important than that, though the modest Byrne, who loosens up markedly talking rock 'n' roll, won't quite admit it.

"In a small way, we tried to reinvent pop songs," Byrne explains. "We figured we'd throw out the dumb lyrics, throw out the stagey lighting, all the fake style that we didn't think had anything to do with our daily lives, so we could make an honest presentation. We were skeptical of accepting even little stuff like the idea that you wear something different onstage than you wear offstage. So we didn't talk much; we didn't move. What was strange was we threw out so much we didn't have much left in."

Perhaps even stranger was Byrne himself and his lyrics. On the one hand, he sang not about sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, but air, books and decisions. "I found out/animals don't help," he announced on "Fear Of Music"; elsewhere he sang of cities, and how they tend to have "Some good points/Some bad points." Some of the songs were funny, with Byrne sounding like a lovesick chemistry student who'd been stuck in the lab too long. Some were totally mystifying: "As

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Photos by Bob Alford

DAVID BYRNE

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the heart finds the good thing/The feeling is multiplied/Add the will to the strength/And it equals conviction/As we economize/Efficiency is multiplied/To the extent I am determined/The result is the good thing." As for the animating presence here, Byrne really worried people. Bolt-upright, twitching, squawking, he appeared dead earnest but also near psychotic. The impression—of total commitment combined with serious neurosis—Byrne now says was misunderstood.

"See, I thought a lot of that stuff had a sense of humor," he says.

"I mean, people said I came across as really tortured and angst-ridden but I thought I was having fun. Like 'Animals.' I thought that was really kind of funny, but people started writing, 'Oh, this guy's really around the bend now: he's nervous about animals,' or 'Boy, I feel sorry for this guy.' Probably it was my fault, either through my delivery or just setting the song in too high a key. After a while, I realized this was going wrong."

These days, Byrne even admits to happiness.

There remains a strange alien's bewilderment to what he does, although his bearing is naive. He rents a house in L.A. and lives in an apartment where Manhattan runs to artists' lofts and "RENTAL SPACE" signs. He says "the band's got a little different mood now," though "whenever we get together it's always great and things start happening." Speaking of his attitude, he says maybe he's "gotten to like people more."

"I mean, I don't think so separate anymore," he says quietly.

"I think I used to feel other people's lives and mine were so different that we could do our business, but not have that much more to say. Now I sort of feel I can go up to people in small towns and not feel I'm a total foreigner. I feel confident we have the same likes and dislikes, the same concerns."

Then he pauses, looks nervously over his shoulder.

"It's easier to catch flies with honey than vinegar," he says. ▣

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